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ABSTRACT

A study used qualitative methods, as part of a 2-year collaborative university/middle school effort, to understand the instructional reading practices in effect at the seventh-grade level and to investigate whether any of the practices might be related to differential reading performance of the school's African-American students. Few of the teachers felt comfortable teaching reading at the middle-school level. They tended to emphasize whole-class instruction, oral reading, and the coverage of required texts, practices not oriented toward helping low readers improve their reading. The low reading performance of the African-American students was affected by the school's use of homogeneous grouping, overrepresentation of African Americans in the low classes, and by the type of reading instruction offered in these classes. If middle-school students are to improve their literacy capabilities, and if past inequities are to be overturned, then middle school experts and faculty, along with literacy experts, need to work together to develop a literacy curriculum. (Contains 35 references and 2 tables of data. Appendixes provide the initial framework for analysis and coding sheets for observational field notes.) (Author/RS)

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READING INSTRUCTION AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

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November 1995

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Abstract

This study used qualitative methods, as part of a 2-year collaborative university/middle school effort, to understand the instructional reading practices in effect at the seventh-grade level and to investigate whether any of the practices might be related to the differential reading performance of the school's African-American students. Few of the teachers felt comfortable teaching reading at the middle-school level. They tended to emphasize whole-class instruction, oral reading, and the coverage of required texts, practices not oriented toward helping low readers improve their reading. The low reading performance of the African-American students was affected by the school's use of homogeneous grouping, overrepresentation of African Americans in the low classes, and by the type of reading instruction offered in these classes. If middle-school students are to improve their literacy capabilities, and if past inequities are to be overturned, then middle school experts and faculty, along with literacy experts, need to work together to develop a literacy curriculum.

READING INSTRUCTION AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

Educators have long been concerned with how best to address the educational needs of young adolescents. Proponents of the middle-school movement argue that early adolescents are in a developmental transition period unique to this age, and that they need to "have teachers to whom they can relate and a . . . program that will inspire them and give them feelings of success" (Clarke & Clarke, 1987, p. 26). Correspondingly, much of the middle-school literature focuses on the organization and structure of the middle school and how to address the social, psychological, and physical needs of the students (among others see Beane, 1990; Lounsbury, 1992; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978). Recommended practices include exploratory courses, cooperative learning, flexible scheduling, interdisciplinary team organization, and advisor/advisee programs (Epstein, 1990).

Recently, middle-school advocates have turned their attention to the role of curriculum and instruction (Beane, 1990; Irvin, 1992; Toepfer, 1992). Most of this attention has focused on the question of *how* the curriculum should be taught rather than on *what* should be taught and learned (Toepfer, 1992). For example, two common suggestions in the middle-school literature are that teachers should involve students in problem-solving activities and that they should relate what they are teaching to the students' experiences both in and out of school (Irvin, 1992). One possible reason for the reduced interest in curriculum content is that teachers at this level are presumed to have already mastered the content knowledge that they teach (see Irvin, 1992).

Although many middle schools require their students to take a reading class (Becker, 1990), few middle-school experts have focused their attention on what the reading curriculum should emphasize (for exceptions, see Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1988; Irvin, 1992). Similarly, limited attention has focused on what middle-school classroom teachers need to know about reading and writing across the curriculum if they are to help their students improve their literacy performance in content area classrooms. This pattern holds in spite of the fact that middle-school students are expected to learn from text and to reason about what they read and write. Much of their learning is based on textbooks, many of them difficult to read or inconsiderate of the reader (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984; Irvin, 1992).

According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Report Card (1985), large numbers of students entering middle school are incapable of reading and writing the type of material required at this level. Forty percent of the 13-year-olds tested lacked rudimentary comprehension skills, could not search for specific information, interrelate ideas, or make generalizations about the material they read. A disproportionate number of these youths were African American or Hispanic.

If middle-school students are to succeed in school, then it seems imperative that reading instruction at this level be examined. This is a time when adolescents take stock of their literacy development and make choices that affect their later enrollment and performance in high school (Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1988). Students who do not do well at the middle-school level are prime drop-out candidates (Wheelock & Dorman, 1988).

The extent to which differential literacy instruction at the middle-school level compounds the problem of differential achievement is another area that needs further investigation. Quantitative comparisons of African-American and Anglo (non-Hispanic white) first-grade achievement suggest that differential achievement between races may be due more to instructional time and curricular coverage than aptitude, race, or socioeconomic status (Dreeben, 1987; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986). Anyon's (1980, 1981) qualitative comparison of fifth-grade instruction in five schools from contrasting social-class communities revealed that students in the low-income schools received instruction that emphasized rote learning, low expectations, and little decision making; whereas, students in the high-income schools received

instruction that emphasized process-oriented learning, high expectations, and a high level of student decision making.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the discussion on the nature and role of reading instruction at the middle-school level by documenting the type of reading instruction implemented by nine middle-school teachers. The specific research goals were: (a) to understand the instructional reading practices used by the seventh-grade teachers at one particular school, and (b) to determine whether any of the instructional practices might be related to the differential reading performance of the school's African American students.

Research Context

The results reported are from the first-year findings of a 2-year university/public school collaborative effort that focused on improving literacy instruction at the middle-school level. Prior to the effort, one of the school's administrators approached the university about the possibility of using the school as a site for a study on the "transference of research into practice." He wanted information related to several aspects of reading instruction: content area reading, ability grouping, basal reading programs, and phonics. In addition, both he and the school principal voiced concerns about the low reading test scores of the school's African-American population. Although the school's performance on the SRA Achievement tests from 1985-1987 was equal to or better than the national norms for most subject areas, a breakdown of the 1987 reading test scores by race revealed that over 50 percent of the school's African-American students scored below the 30th percentile, compared to 12 percent of the Anglo students. On the other hand, over 45 percent of the Anglo students scored above the 70th percentile while no more than 16 percent of the African-American students did so.

After talking with school personnel and taking into account other demands on teachers' time (e.g., the sixth-grade teachers already were involved in another time-consuming project), we limited the focus of the study during the first year to the seventh-grade level. Because we wanted to document and understand the instructional reading practices in effect, we relied on qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data: detailed field notes of classroom instruction and student/teacher participation; retrospective summaries of open-ended informal interviews with the teachers and staff; tape recordings of teacher team meetings; tape recordings of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the teachers and staff; and field notes from the grade-level meetings in which we met with the teachers to share findings, discuss concerns, and raise questions. Patterns that emerged from the data then were organized into "conceptual categories" (Saville-Troike, 1989), and evaluated according to their "regularities and irregularities," taking into account both positive and negative cases (see Saville-Troike, 1989; Taylor & Bogden, 1984). These patterns then were shared with the teachers and staff for further clarification and elaboration.

Method

Setting

Scott Middle School was one of three middle schools in a Midwestern school district that served approximately 8,000 students. The school included sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, and enrolled approximately 711 students. Over 66 percent of the students were Anglo, 29 percent were African-American, and 3 percent were from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Approximately 26 percent of the students at the school qualified for free or reduced lunches.

The school had been a middle school since 1977. Consistent with the prevailing middle-school philosophy, each grade at the school was organized into teams. Seventy-five to 125 students were assigned to one group of 3-5 teachers for reading, language arts, social studies, science, spelling, and

mathematics instruction, with individual class size averaging 24 students. Teams generally were assigned adjoining rooms to facilitate interaction among the teachers and students. Teachers on the teams were allowed to reformat their students' schedules to accommodate projects that required more than the usual 41-45 minute periods. They also were given two 40-minute planning periods per day, one for individual planning and the other for team planning. In addition, team-planning time on Wednesdays was reserved for curriculum discussions with the learning coordinator. Once a month, team leaders met after school with the principal and other administrative staff to make school-level decisions.

The physical education, art, music, industrial arts, Chapter 1, and special education teachers worked outside of the team structure. The Chapter 1 reading teacher, along with an aide, worked with approximately 40 students in pull-out sessions. The special education teachers taught self-contained adaptive classes that focused on content area subjects. Some of them worked with specific classroom teachers, helping to modify instruction for those special education students mainstreamed into the regular classroom.

Participants

All nine of the seventh-grade teachers participated in the study, as did the two special education teachers assigned to this grade level, the school's Chapter 1 reading teacher, the learning coordinator, and building principal. The classroom teachers were organized into three teams. Each teacher taught a reading class in addition to three other subjects. All of the seventh-grade reading classes met during the fourth period of the day. Five university professors and one graduate research assistant also participated in the study. We observed classroom instruction, met with teachers before and after class, organized and participated in general and grade-level meetings, sat in team meetings, and interviewed teachers and administrative staff.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary data collection consisted of classroom observations; informal and formal interviews with the teachers, learning coordinator, and principal; and researcher participation in team and grade-level meetings.[1] Throughout the study, we kept detailed field notes and tape-recorded interviews and group sessions. We also collected written documents pertinent to the study (e. g., reading program requirements, curriculum lists, sample report cards, classroom rosters, standardized test scores, placement information, the school's 5-year plan submitted to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), school report card, and class handouts).

The first stage of the research consisted of classroom observations. A pair of researchers was assigned to each of the three seventh-grade teaching teams. Their task was to observe each teacher's reading class individually at least twice and a content area class at least once. At the end of this period of observations, each pair met with the teaching team to discuss any questions that arose regarding reading instruction and the team's operation. The team meetings were tape-recorded and the tapes were transcribed. The research pairs then rotated to a different teaching team. Their task in rotation 2 was to observe each teacher's reading class at least once. By the end of the observational period (October through December), each teacher had been observed on three to five occasions, resulting in 40 classroom observations. The two special education teachers and Chapter 1 teacher also were observed on at least two occasions.

Throughout the entire period of observations, the researchers met weekly to share concerns, raise questions, and discuss findings. We shared observational field notes and information obtained in the team meetings and informal discussions. By comparing the findings, patterns began to emerge about how and why reading instruction was structured as it was. These findings were discussed with individual

teachers, and later shared with all the teachers and the learning coordinator in a grade-level meeting that took place during the second stage of the research.

The second stage of the research consisted of six grade-level meetings that were held during the seventh-grade teachers' team-planning time. The grade-level meetings did not begin until after the classroom observations were completed and took place during the second semester of the school year. It was during the first grade-level meeting that we shared our observational findings with the teachers and specifically asked them to make any clarifications or to identify and/or explain any misunderstandings. The subsequent meetings provided an opportunity for both groups (researchers and teachers) to share observations, knowledge, and concerns about reading instruction. Although some of the teachers began to initiate a few changes in their reading instruction, the primary goal of the grade-level meetings was to set the scene for the collaborative effort to be undertaken during the second year. Throughout the grade-level meetings, two graduate students took field notes, focusing on the teachers' reactions, points of clarification, and general comments.

Stage three of our research consisted of follow-up interviews at the end of the school year with the seventh-grade teachers, special education and Chapter 1 teachers, learning coordinator, and building principal. All but 3 of the 12 teachers agreed to be interviewed. These interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, and were designed to focus on unanswered questions generated throughout the study. Interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes, and were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Early in our weekly research meetings, we generated an initial framework for analysis to guide our thinking (Appendix A). Next, two of the researchers met to develop a coding framework that would capture the similarities and differences we were seeing across the classrooms. As we looked for patterns in the data, we continually expanded the framework to match the types of data that were emerging from the observational field notes. Based on this framework, each researcher then coded the observational data and wrote a synthesis of an individual teacher's reading instruction as portrayed by the coded field notes and information obtained from the informal discussions and team meetings (see Appendix B). The coded field notes and portrayals were discussed in the research meetings, and from this discussion we identified overall patterns of instruction for the seventh-grade and for the cross-team, low, middle, and high reading classes. As noted previously, we presented the overall patterns to the teachers for verification and further discussion in the first grade-level meeting. Next, we analyzed field notes from the grade-level meetings, transcripts from the follow-up interviews, and data from the written documents in concert with the observational data.

Presentation of the Findings

In this section of the paper, we first outline the school's organization of reading instruction at the seventh-grade level. Then, we describe the overall patterns of reading instruction that we observed in both the reading and content area classes. Next, we present the patterns of instruction that characterized the different levels of reading classes. Where possible, we have used the voices of the teachers and learning coordinator to help illustrate their explanations and concerns. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

Organization of Reading Instruction at the Seventh-Grade Level

As depicted in Table 1, the nine classroom teachers were organized into three teams (Teams A, B, and C). Each of the classroom teachers taught a reading class in addition to three other subjects. The reading and mathematics classes were the only classes tracked. Criteria used for reading placement decisions included the students' SRA achievement and IQ test scores, their sixth-grade teacher's ranking

of their performance, and their sixth-grade reading composite grades, with the students' achievement and IQ test scores receiving the most weight. The principal used this information to place students on the teams so that the teams were heterogeneous. Within the teams, the seventh-grade teachers then decided on the students' reading placement. Teams A and C had high, middle, and low reading classes; whereas, Team B had a high, middle, and cross-team reading class. The cross-team reading class was for those students who, at the end of sixth grade, ranked in the bottom 10 percent of the school's sixth graders on the SRA reading achievement test. Students were brought together from each of the three teams to form this class.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Thirty students were assigned to the cross-team reading class. Due to the large number of students, three teachers were assigned to work with the class: Mrs. W (a mathematics teacher) , Mrs. D (an experienced teacher of emotionally and mentally handicapped children), and Mrs. E (a specialist in learning disabilities). The learning coordinator explained that they assigned three teachers to this class because they thought that a higher teacher-student ratio would be best for these students. The three teachers then decided to let Mrs. E work with the lowest students in a pull-out setting.

About one-third of the seventh-grade students were African American (n = 73), while approximately two-thirds were Anglo (n = 142). Two of the nine classroom teachers were African American as was one of the special education teachers. The rest of the teachers were Anglo. So, while the proportion of teachers with whom the African-American students had contact (25%) did not reflect their representation at this grade level (33%), the African-American student-teacher ratio was much higher than what is found in other schools. One of the African-American classroom teachers taught a low reading class, while the other African-American classroom teacher taught a middle reading class.

Other than the Chapter 1 and learning disability teachers, none of the seventh-grade teachers considered themselves to be reading teachers, although they all taught reading. Of the nine classroom teachers, three were certified to teach grades K-9, while the other six were certified to teach grades 6-12. Eight of the nine classroom teachers had extensive teaching experience at the middle-school level. Only two of the teachers had updated their knowledge about reading by completing a reading class at the local university.

Although several of the teachers voiced their concerns about teaching an area, such as reading, in which they did not feel qualified, others stated that it was important that they not become subject area specialists. For example, Mr. A explained that by not exclusively focusing on one subject area, they stayed true to the middle-school philosophy and became "teachers of children":

> Mr. A: So, if you have a junior high you are very subject oriented; you are interested in your subjects. . . . This way, the theory is anyway that we're teachers of children. It has worked very well. We get together and we discuss the problems that we see these children having and we try to do something about it.

However, Mrs. V, who came from a secondary background and who was in her first year of teaching at the middle-school level, still was not convinced about the advisability of teaching a range of subjects:

> Mrs. V: I think that professionally, middle school means you teach a little of everything. And of course, that's not O.K. Grammar's not my love.

The reading curriculum at each grade level was determined by a K-12 district curriculum committee, which included teachers and administrators from each of the district schools. At the beginning of the school year, all of the middle-school teachers at Scott School received a reading program requirements

sheet; a list of appropriate textbooks; a rotation schedule for thematic units; and a list of books, teacher guides, and audio-visual materials that could be used in each of the thematic units. Although the reading program requirements sheet, prepared by the learning coordinator, stated that "the important thing initially is to get our students to read, enjoy it, and get excited about it," a review of the sheet made it clear that the route to excitement was through the readings specified for the particular grade and reading levels.

A major goal of the reading program requirements was to make sure "that we standardize expectations at each grade level so that we can guarantee consistency from team to team and from year to year." In order to accomplish this goal, the seventh-grade teachers were instructed to use the core textbooks specified for students at different reading levels (high, middle, and low) and to spend a minimum of 3 weeks using specified textbooks to pursue the following thematic units: award winning books, biography, growing up, and fantasy. The only classroom teachers who were excused from using the designated materials were the teachers of the cross-team class, who could substitute alternative materials with the prior approval of the learning coordinator or principal.

Overall Patterns of Observed Reading Instruction

Instructional events related to reading. Whenever students were asked to read, whether in a reading class or one of the content area classes, they read orally. Oral reading was predominant in eight of the nine reading classes. Indeed, during the course of our observations, we saw only three instances of silent reading. Usually, the teachers called on individual students to take turns reading orally (e.g., round robin oral reading). Occasionally, a teacher had a student assume the role of assigning oral reading. When students were not reading orally, the teachers were, and students listened or followed along at their desks.

Teachers used a variety of rationales, including student interest, to explain their reliance on oral reading. Mrs. F, who taught a middle reading class, stated that oral reading generally helped students stay on task:

> Mrs. F: It tends to focus attention. The student follows what the reader is reading and they tend to digress less and squirm less if they're concentrating on following what the reader is reading aloud.

Mrs. Z, who taught the one high reading class in which oral reading was not dominant, pointed out that she and her colleagues used oral reading frequently in the content area classes because these classes generally were not grouped by ability, and oral reading helped all of the students gain access to the material:

> Mrs. Z: In some of the classes, of course, there are children that have learning disability problems that learn better by listening, and so to accommodate a mixed bag of kids that way you need to do it sometimes.

Mrs. R, a middle reading teacher, used oral reading in her social studies class--where she had a large number of low readers intermixed with middle and high readers--as a classroom management tool:

> Mrs. R: If I make assignments for them to read silently, what I find is the fast reader or the good readers will finish and the others are plodding along trying to finish. . . .

Organization of instruction. The majority of the teachers used whole-class instruction in both their reading and content area classes. The teachers generally directed an activity from the front of the room with the students sitting at their desks. The teachers presented new material by mini-lecturing, reading

text orally, or having the students read aloud. Sometimes, the teachers assigned the students seat work and circulated throughout the classroom monitoring individual students' progress. Small group work was not observed, nor was peer reading or peer tutoring. In response to this finding, Mrs. Z explained that the homogeneous grouping in the reading classes meant that the teachers could teach to one level, using whole group instruction:

> Mrs. Z: they are fairly level groups so you can address the whole class. In years past I have in fact had three different reading levels in my class, so I certainly didn't do it that way.

Focus of instruction. Although there was some individual variation, the general focus of instruction in both the reading and content-area classes was imparting or assessing knowledge. For example, Mrs. R explained that she used oral reading in her social studies classes so that all of the students would have access to the material:

> Mrs. R: Oral reading makes sure that everybody gets to the same point at the same time and that all the material I ask them to read is covered.

In the reading classes knowledge typically included knowing the titles and genres of the stories read, their authors, the principal characters, the settings, the plot, and specific events. A few teachers focused on character development. In some way, shape, or form all of the teachers paid attention to the students' knowledge of story-related vocabulary. Frequently, before they read the story, students were given a list of words based on the story and asked to look them up in the book's glossary. In one of the high reading classes, they then were asked to write a sentence based on how the words were used in the story.

We observed little instruction on the processes or strategies to develop comprehension, and we saw virtually no examples of teachers explicitly guiding students to use particular text comprehension strategies. Skill development was observed in the low reading classes in the form of teachers correcting students' faulty oral reading. Strategies for dealing with content area text were observed in neither the reading nor the content area classes. In the middle and high reading classes, some of the teachers tried to enhance the students' appreciation of literature by getting them to analyze character development, plot, and theme.

Assessment. The students' knowledge was assessed primarily through teacher questioning--characterized by the teacher initiates-student responds-teacher evaluates (TI-SR-TE) participant structure (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979)--or through written assignments or tests where they were asked to answer questions regarding what they had read. There were a few open-ended writing assignments in some of the language arts and reading classes (e.g., complete the last chapter of this book). However, the teacher, text, or manual tended to provide the correct answers. Students were evaluated on the basis of their own individual work. No group projects were observed.

Trends Observed at the Different Reading Levels

Use of oral reading. While all teachers used oral reading, those who taught the low reading classes used it more frequently, and acknowledged that they did not require much silent reading from their students. For example, Mrs. D, the special education teacher who co-taught the cross-team reading class, explained that they used oral reading to enhance the lower readers' comprehension:

> Mrs. D: Most of them are on the third- or fourth-grade level, and research indicates if they read on that particular level, they comprehend better by reading orally.

Mrs. Y, one of the teachers who taught a low reading class, said that she never had her students do silent reading because she felt as if she was not doing anything:

> Mrs. Y: I've never used silent reading because I have a low group, and, seriously, I think I'd feel guilty that I was having them just sitting there.

The Chapter 1 reading teacher, Mrs. X, stated that her students were more secure when they read orally:

> Mrs. X: I think they feel more secure, and it's easier because they don't have to think as much because someone else is reading, and they're not having to decode themselves.

Even though we observed almost no silent reading, our interview data suggest that the middle and high reading teachers used it to some degree. Several noted that they frequently had their students read new material silently before they did the oral reading. One of the high reading teachers said that he assigned silent reading at home and frequently gave students time in class to complete this work.

Teacher control and direction. Almost all of the activities we observed were teacher-defined and teacher-directed, although there was some variation across the different reading levels. Generally, the lower the reading level, the more teacher-controlled and -directed the class appeared to be. Student initiation of teacher/student interaction in the cross-team class was limited to procedural questions about how an assignment was to be finished. In the middle and high reading classes, students asked more questions, and they included informational as well as procedural questions. Frequently their questions consisted of a suggestion about how a task could be implemented (e.g., "Could we go to the library to do that?"). Teachers in these classes reacted to student initiations by elaborating on the questions students raised; on occasion, they even altered assignments in accordance with student suggestions.

Ironically, the teaming concept in the cross-team class also led to more teacher-directed instruction. While one teacher led the whole class in an activity, the other circulated throughout the room monitoring student behavior. As Mrs. D explained, her goal was to keep the students on task:

> Mrs. D: My goals are to make sure that the kids get at least 80 percent or more of their assignments in, to make sure that the special kids who are there participate in class, and at this particular level to make sure they have all their proper supplies. . . .

In the cross-team class, we observed very little student participation outside of the TI-SR-TE participant structure.

Teacher expectations and curriculum implementation. The teachers held different expectations for the reading classes and generally accepted the district's categorization of reading materials by reading levels. The teachers and learning coordinator were particularly frustrated that low-performing students wouldn't do work outside of class. The learning coordinator, Mr. L explained that:

> Mr. L: [These] kids do not do homework. The teachers resignedly say that there is no point in assigning them work; they will not do it.

He said that he, too, became discouraged when he substituted for the learning disability teacher over a 3-day period. He had the children read part of a novel and asked them to do an assignment outside of class on what they had read. It was difficult for him to teach the class the next day because his lesson plan was based on the homework assignment, which none of the children had completed.

As noted previously, the Reading Program Requirements specified the textbooks and novels that were to be "taught" at the low, middle, and high reading levels. Only the cross-team teachers were exempt

from this requirement and were allowed to use alternative materials with their students. Although they, as well as the teachers of the low reading classes, complained that many of the texts on the approved lists were too difficult for their students, the only teachers who used alternative materials were the learning disability teacher and Chapter 1 teacher.

None of the seventh-grade teachers questioned the district's definition of materials as curriculum. The majority of them also seemed to accept the district's categorization of reading materials by reading level. For example, Mrs. F, a middle reading teacher, explained that her students could not have read the book that the students in the high group read:

> Mrs. F: It has been determined that *Wrinkle in Time* is suitable and appropriate for my middle class level. Mr. A is teaching *The Yearling* in his class. No way could my kids handle *The Yearling*. He has the high ability reading group.

One of the seventh-grade teachers, who taught a high reading class, did violate the standardization of reading materials called for in the reading program requirements. In opposition to school policy--which stated that all resources should be spent on the school library, Mrs. Z had her own classroom library. Because she encouraged her students to read books from her library or to purchase books from various mail order book companies, many of her students ended up reading books that were reserved for the eighth-grade level.

Apart from Mrs. Z's classroom, self-selection of books was not part of the reading curriculum. All of the seventh-grade teachers, including Mrs. Z, sent their students to the school library on a periodic basis. However, the general practice was for the students to read the library books out of class or when they were finished with their assigned work.

Racial distribution of students. As summarized in Table 2, the racial distribution of pupils throughout the reading levels was disproportionate. In the cross-team class, there were 20 African-American students enrolled, compared to 8 Anglo students and 2 limited-English-speaking Asian students. The numbers in the low reading classes were more proportional, 19 African-American and 20 Anglo students; however, when combined with the cross-team class, this meant that 39 out of 73 African American students (over 50%) were in the lower classes, compared to 28 out of 142 Anglo students (almost 20%). In the higher classes, there were only 12 African American students (15%), compared to 62 Anglo students (43%).

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Discussion of the Findings

In the beginning of the study, we sought to understand the instructional reading practices in effect at Scott Middle School. We also wanted to understand whether any of the instructional practices might be related to the differential reading performance of the school's African-American students. In some ways, the reading instruction provided the students in the lower classes was not all that different from the reading instruction provided to the students in the middle and high reading classes. For example, whole-class instruction and oral reading characterized most of the reading classes. In addition, almost all of the teachers defined their reading curriculum as covering required texts. Few of the students in any of the reading classes were shown how to select materials for reading or how to improve their reading comprehension through the development of reading strategies. Instruction in the content area classes also was not linked to instruction in the reading classes, not even in the case of the language arts classroom, where writing was the primary focus of instruction. The curricular emphasis on content knowledge in both the reading and content area classrooms meant that the students were not provided with instruction on how to read to learn from textbooks or informational trade books in either of the

two settings. None of these characteristics are consistent with current reading research and theory (Duffy, 1990; García & Pearson, 1991a; Irvin, 1992), nor are they reflective of the ideal literacy characteristics defined by Davidson & Koppenhaver (1988) in their review of literacy programs at the middle-school level. However, it is likely that those seventh-grade students who were already adept readers could survive such practices better than those who were not.

Relative to the second question, it appears that the differential reading performance of the African-American students was influenced by the school's use of homogeneously tracked reading classes, by the overrepresentation of African American students in the low classes, and by the type of reading instruction offered in the cross-team and low reading classes. Each of these factors--homogeneous tracking, overrepresentation of minority students in the low classes, and the type of instruction presented in the lower reading classes--has been cited individually or in combination by other researchers interested in understanding differential achievement (see Allington, 1983; Dreeben, 1987; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1990). In our study, we found that all three factors interacted to influence and perpetuate differential literacy achievement.

According to the teachers and principal, homogeneous tracking of students was used in the reading classes because they thought that this was the best way to meet the diverse needs of their students. While tracking and grouping, in and of themselves, are not necessarily bad, the instruction that we observed did not include many of the advantages identified in the grouping literature for students in the low tracks (see Slavin, 1990). For example, a greater level of student participation did not occur in the low or cross-team classes, nor did students in these classes receive individualized instruction or additional support in their attempt to read the required texts.

The only areas in which the grouping practices might have met the diverse needs of the students (and eased the tasks of the teachers) was in the assignment of texts to be read and in the grading of the students. To a certain extent, these two emphases reflected the ways in which the school interpreted its curricular and middle-school mission. For example, curriculum was viewed as content, and by differentiating the texts to be read at the different reading levels, one could say that the varied curricular needs of the students were being met. Similarly, the grouping of students by "reading" level meant that teachers could give students in the cross-team and low reading classes grades of A or B without having to compare their performance to that of students in the middle or high reading classes. The latter practice clearly fit the school's image of itself as a "middle-school" by allowing the teachers to address what they perceived to be the social and psychological needs of their students. On the other hand, the specification and standardization of texts by reading level did not result in the identification of texts that the teachers thought were suitable for the lower readers, nor did it result in teachers helping students to select books that reflected their varied interests. Similarly, the grading practice obscured the fact that students in the lower classes were not necessarily improving their abilities to select, read, or learn from text because these areas were not the focus of instruction. So, while the teachers and principal may have thought that tracking in the reading classes helped to meet the diverse needs of their students, in reality, this did not occur.

The overrepresentation of the African-American students in the low reading classes might have been the result of past schooling practices. However, the criteria used by the school to make reading placement decisions did not help to alleviate this situation. The most heavily weighted criteria were the students' standardized reading achievement test scores and IQ test scores, both of which have been criticized for cultural test bias (see García, 1991; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1986), and neither of which provides useful information about the students' reading strategies, strengths or weaknesses (see García & Pearson, 1991b). While the students' sixth-grade reading composite grades and their sixth-grade teachers' ranking of the students probably reflected the students' motivation and knowledge of curriculum materials covered in sixth grade, they did not provide the teachers with much information about the students' reading strengths and weaknesses. To the best of our knowledge, none of the sixth- or seventh-grade classroom teachers assessed the reading of these students through informal

or classroom-based means (see Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Valencia, McGinley, & Pearson, 1990). Part of this was clearly due to the teachers' limited knowledge-base about reading and reading assessment. Nonetheless, the end-result of not using informal or classroom-based assessment was that the instruction offered to the students in the low and cross-team reading classes again was not based on meeting the students' needs.

The major problem with the reading instruction offered to the students in the low and cross-team reading classes was that these students were not shown how to improve their reading comprehension (see Durkin, 1978-79; García & Pearson, 1991a). In addition, they were exposed to considerably less text than the students in the other groups. Because the teachers did not think that they would complete out-of-class reading, none was assigned. The use of whole-group instruction and oral reading to impart information and control classroom behavior also resulted in reduced opportunities to read (Allington, 1983). Finally, the limited amount of student decision-making and student initiation of teacher-student interactions observed in the cross-team and low reading classes, along with the emphasis on whole-class instruction and oral reading, could have contributed to attitudes of passivity or learned helplessness, which are said to characterize poor readers (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Johnston & Winograd, 1985). This attitude tends to be compounded when students are continually placed in low groups without receiving the help that they need to improve their reading performance.

Concluding Remarks

Scott Middle School had many of the organizational trappings of the ideal middle school: its grade levels were organized by interdisciplinary teams, the class schedules were flexible, and each team of teachers was given time on a daily basis to meet and plan as a team. The teachers were encouraged to work together on field trips and interdisciplinary projects, and the learning coordinator met weekly with each of the grade levels to help plan, organize, and implement "exploratory" topics. In addition, the teachers and staff seemed to demonstrate a genuine concern for the psychological and social development of their students, frequently meeting at the team level to discuss "problem" students. The school was clean and none of the teachers or students expressed concerns about their safety at the school.

The school also had recognized the need to address reading skills at this level by requiring every middle-school student to take a class in reading. However, the administrators' and teachers' lack of knowledge about reading instruction meant that they were unable to identify and meet the needs of their students. Even the elementary-trained teachers, who previously had taught reading at the elementary level, were uncertain about the extent to which what they had learned at the elementary level could be applied to the middle level. Clearly, the range of subjects that each of the teachers was required to teach made it difficult for them to learn about subject areas and instructional practices with which they were not familiar.

It is interesting to note that several of the teachers thought that the wide range of subject preparations was positive because it forced them to focus their attention on their students and not on their subject areas. They called this a child-centered approach. Yet, the curricular emphasis resembled the content-domain structure of the high school and not the child-centered domain of the elementary school (McPartland, 1990). McPartland warns that in the quest to "develop positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students" (p. 467), middle schools run the risk of producing "supportive human environments" that "work against the development of effective learning activities in each subject area" (p. 468). Scott Middle School's approach to reading seemed to illustrate this dilemma.

A variety of researchers have pointed out the disparities in instruction that exist across schools (Anyon, 1980, 1981; Dreeben, 1987; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1985), and the impact that

such disparities can have on student achievement. This study has demonstrated how differences in reading achievement can be perpetuated, and perhaps exacerbated, within a school. Given that reading achievement is linked to academic achievement, and to the likelihood of students staying in school, it seems imperative for the middle-school movement to pay more attention to the nature and role of reading instruction at the middle school level. Sadly, the use of homogeneous grouping, the overrepresentation of African American students in the low classes, and the type of reading instruction presented in these classes reflect a national trend that already has been documented in the elementary school literature (see Allington, 1983; Dreeben, 1987; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986). If this trend is to be overturned at the middle-school level, middle-school teachers and administrators need to recognize its dire consequences and become "informed decision makers."

The findings in this study suggest that literacy educators, middle-school experts, and middle-school teachers and staff need to work together to develop a literacy curriculum appropriate for this level. Some of the key areas identified in our study that need to be addressed by this combined community paralleled many of those identified by Davidson and Koppenhaver (1988) in their review of middle-school literacy practices. These include the appropriate role of oral reading, the importance of silent reading, the facilitation of independent reading; the development of comprehension strategies for both narrative and expository text; the use of varied grouping and organizational arrangements; and the active participation of students in discussions and in the design and implementation of literacy tasks that involve reading and writing both across the curriculum and in the reading classroom. Two other areas, not cited by Davidson & Koppenhaver (1988), are the use of multicultural literature to engage youths, especially those from diverse backgrounds, and the use of authentic assessment methods to understand students' reading strengths and weaknesses.

The middle school, with its emphasis on problem solving, exploratory courses, and interdisciplinary team organization, should be able to meet the reading needs of individual students at the same time that it provides them with an environment that meets their social, psychological, and physical needs. If middle schools do not address this combined challenge, then it is likely that current efforts will serve only to perpetuate instead of resolve issues of educational inequity.

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Footnote

[1]Throughout the school year, and at the request of the learning coordinator and school principal, we also organized four inservice meetings with the entire faculty. These meetings were held after school and focused on reading comprehension instruction, whole language, and content-area reading. A graduate student took field notes throughout these sessions, noting teachers' reactions to the material presented.

Table 1

Teacher and Subject Assignment by Team

	Team A			Team B			Team C		
Teacher	Mrs. Z	Mrs. U	Mrs. Y	Mrs. T	Mrs. R	Mrs. W	Mr. A	Mrs. F	Mrs. V
Subject	Number of Classes								
Reading[a]	1 (High)	1 (Middle)	1 (Low)	1 (High)	1 (Middle)	1 (Cross team)[b]	1 (High)	1 (Middle)	1 (Low)
Language Arts	1	1	1	3	--	--	2	1	--
Mathematics	--	3	--	--	--	3	--	--	3
Science	3	--	--	1	1	1	2	--	1
Social Studies	--	--	3	--	3	--	--	3	--
Spelling	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

[a]( ) indicates level of reading class

[b]also taught by a teacher of special education and a teacher of learning disabilities.

Table 2

Racial Distribution Observed at the Four Reading Levels

Class Levels	Number of African-American Students	%[a]	Number of Anglo Students	%[a]
Cross-team	20	(27)	8	(6)
Low	19	(26)	20	(14)
Middle	22	(30)	52	(37)
High	12	(16)	62	(44)
TOTAL	73		142	

[a]Percentages are rounded off to the highest percent.

APPENDIX A

INITIAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Contexts

Physical

Social - interactions, demographics

Political - decision-making

Pedagogical

- Materials
- Tasks
  - Behavior
  - Cognitive
- Approach/Style/Method

Philosophical: Stated and implied (what is the overall message regarding literacy, who can/cannot participate, and how they participate)

Appendix B

Part One: Coding of field notes (see coding sheet attached)

For each observation, use the right margin to code the transcript as follows:

1. Identify classroom events related to instruction. Label those as either (1) assessment; (2) instruction; (3) classroom learning activity. (Please note that (3) is subdivided. Use the subcodes as necessary.)

2. For each of these activities, use the coding sheet to identify the following:

   A. Materials and content area
   B. Structure
   C. Locus of control
   D. Grouping
   E. Focus

3. Identify classroom events not related to instruction. Code these as (8) if it relates to the students and (9) if it relates to the teacher.

4. Review the entire transcript relative to interaction patterns. Label these as follows:

   Teacher initiates (TI)
   Student initiates (SI)
   Teacher responds (TR)
   Student responds (SR)
   Teacher evaluates (TE)
   Student evaluates (SE)

5. Review the entire transcript to identify demographic characteristics (if any) of participants. Use the following to code this information:

   AM = African-American male
   AF = African-American female
   WM = White male
   WF = White female
   OM = Other male
   OF = Other female

Part Two: Synthesizing across observations

A. On a separate sheet of paper, please write summary statements for each of the following:

1. Physical (description of the classroom: rows, tables, amount of print, classroom library, etc.)

2. Demographic information by class (number of African-American, White, other minority, male, female)

3. Tasks (use information in #2 on page 1)

4. Time (give an overview of time use in the classroom: how much time was spent on academic tasks, how much time "off-task", etc.)

5. Significant features not captured by this analysis (e.g., this analysis would not have captured the role of the second teacher in the cross-team classroom).

B. Please make researcher comments related to the following:

1. Tone of the classroom (based on the interaction patterns, structure of the classroom, etc., provide an overview of the affect of the class)

2. Literacy within the classroom (who participates, to what extent, why and within what types of activities. What message does this send about literacy, e.g., is it possible that based on classroom experiences students might perceive reading as oral performance?)

3. Questions you have about the school, this classroom, this teacher, these students. What don't you know or understand at this point in time?

Coding Sheet for Observational Field Notes

1. Classroom instructional event

   (1) Assessment - formal and authentic testing and/or education

   (2) Instruction - explicit teaching and/or telling or modeling

   (3) Classroom learning activity - activity that provides information, skill development, practice, student inquiry/discovery

   When reading of some type occurs, please code as follows:

   (a) Teacher reads to student

   (b) Student reads orally

   (c) Student reads assigned item silently

   (d) Student reads self-selected item silently

2. A. Materials and content area

10a	Text	01	Social Studies
10b	Basal/Anthology	02	Science
10c	Trade book	03	Math
10d	Workbook/Sheet	04	Literature
10e	Blank paper	05	Reading
10f	Kit	06	Writing
10g	Manipulative	07	Grammar
10h	Computer	08	Spelling
10i	Tape recorder	09	Phonics
10j	Other gadgets	10	Vocabulary
10k	Art supplies	11	Music
10l	Film	12	Drama
10m	Blackboard	13	Art
10n	Test	14	Other

2. B. Structure of task or activity

   41 Structured - one correct response/approach
   42 Semi-structured - variety answers/approaches
   43 Spontaneous - not preplanned

2. C. Locus of control - Decision making

51 Teacher
52 Collaborative between teacher-student(s)
53 Student

2. D. Grouping - Instructional Organization

81 Whole class with teacher
82 Small group with teacher
83 Individual with teacher
84 Whole class without teacher
85 Small group without teacher
86 Individual without teacher

2. E. Focus of instruction, assessment, or activity

21 Knowledge - Factual (e.g., authors)
22 Skills - skill knowledge or use (e.g., grammar, and reading, prefixes)
23 Strategies - strategy knowledge or use (e.g., when and how to do something)